

On Rules and Rule-Governed Behavior: A Reply to Catania's Reply

Sigrid S. Glenn
University of North Texas

Although I agree with the characterization of rule-governed behavior as "behavior under the control of verbal antecedents" (Catania, 1989), such a statement is not adequate as a *definition*, even a working definition. That is, I believe, the reason that Skinner (1969) went on to further specify its character at some length, and others (e.g., Cerutti, 1989) have seen fit to further clarify the concept.

One problem with Catania's "working definition" is that it is too inclusive. "Behavior under control of verbal antecedents" includes all intraverbal responses, all textual responses, and all autoclitics and I think that most behavior analysts would exclude much of that behavior from the category of rule-governed behavior.

Another problem is that Catania's definition implies a distinction between how verbal and nonverbal stimuli *function* as controlling variables. That is, *rule-governed behavior* is seemingly unique in that it is controlled by *verbal* stimuli. Control by such stimuli is apparently to be considered sufficiently different from behavior controlled by other stimuli that a new kind or class of behavior has been identified. Although control by verbal stimuli may eventually be distinguishable from control by nonverbal stimuli, Catania has provided no basis for any such distinction. Meanwhile, radical behaviorists have (following Skinner) generally taken the parsimonious position that the way in which verbal stimuli function does not "differ in any particulars from other kinds of stimulation. The behavior of a man as listener is not to be distinguished from other forms of his behavior" (1957, p. 34).

With regard to the topic of how to talk about "rules," Catania argues that we should consider the term a relational term (like rein-

forcer and discriminative stimulus). This means that some verbal stimulus can be identified as a rule only if some behavior can be identified as being governed by it. Thus, Mr. Smith's classroom rules, which are written on the blackboard, are not rules unless the kids obey them. Catania insists that rules *must* function as discriminative stimuli. I don't believe rules must function as discriminative stimuli (for the behavior of following them) any more than red lights must function as discriminative stimuli for bar pressing. An experimenter may define a light to be used in an experiment in terms of its wavelength, but the experimenter can only identify the light as a discriminative stimulus if it is observed to reliably evoke behavior of a given class.

An experimenter should, similarly, be able to identify a given verbal stimulus as a rule whether or not it is a discriminative stimulus for the behavior of responding in accordance with the rule. If the child follows the rule, the rule is a discriminative stimulus (and the behavior is "rule-governed"). The experimenter is then in a position to manipulate various parameters of the verbal stimulus (as well as other environmental events of interest) to observe if the stimulus control is maintained (i.e., if the rule continues to "govern" the behavior).

Catania and I both appear to take verbal stimuli, as such, to differ from other stimuli in some way. He does not say how, but I suggest (as have others, for example, Peterson [1978] and Skinner [1957, p. 34]) that verbal stimuli are the products of verbal behavior—that is, they are defined as such in terms of their origin.

Although I am quite convinced that it is important to the scientific enterprise to distinguish between the kinds of verbal be-

havior exemplified by the responses "red light" and "discriminative stimulus," I will not here undertake such a task. I will suggest that a radical behaviorist approach would distinguish between the kinds of variables that control these two kinds of scientific verbal behavior. If there are any similarities in the form of the behavior resulting from such an analysis to the form of the verbal behavior arising from "traditional philosophy," so be it. The controlling variables will surely differ.

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